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Show Me Agriculture

Kansas City's Beef Cattle History

Missouri's largest cities are St. Louis and Kansas City. When we think about them, we are more likely to think about the Cardinals or Royals baseball teams, the Rams or Chiefs football teams, or maybe the Blues hockey team. We often do not think of agriculture as being important to these big cities. However, agriculture has been very important in the history of not only Missouri's rural areas, but also of these cities. This is especially true of one of Missouri's largest cities, Kansas City.

Kansas City's population increased a great deal after the Civil War. Its location at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri rivers was important to its development. Also, Kansas City became an important town where pioneers who were moving west could buy their supplies. These pioneers might have been heading up the Oregon Trail or they might have been going to California for the gold rush. These people needed to purchase supplies from wagonmakers, saddlemakers, and blacksmiths. Of course, they also needed food.

There was one industry that probably did more to cause Kansas City to grow than any other. That was the meat packing industry – especially from beef cattle. In the late 1860's, cattle drives were common. In these cattle

drives, Longhorn cattle were herded from Texas along the Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas. Then the cattle were loaded onto trains and were shipped to Kansas City where they were processed.

*Ships made Carthage,
gold made Nome,
Grain made Babylon,
the wars built Rome,
Hogs made Chicago with
their dying squeal,
Up popped Pittsburgh
at the birth of steel;
Come Kansas City,
make your story brief:
"Here stands a city built
o' bread and beef."*

Up to that time, Longhorn cattle had been mainly used as a source of cowhide for leather and were not considered important for beef that would be eaten. The meat from Longhorns was rather stringy and tough. This was because the cattle had only had dry range grasses to eat and also the cattle had had to walk all the way from Texas to Kansas. The meat was very lean but not at all tender. The meat packing companies soon learned to can the beef, which made it better for eating. Many important meatpacking companies developed in Kansas City. It was estimated that by 1900, the packing companies in Kansas City processed over 4.5 million head of livestock (cattle, swine and sheep) in one year.

At the same time, flour milling was becoming important in Kansas City. The state of Kansas was becoming the leading wheat producing state and much of that wheat came to Kansas City to be made into flour. Kansas City's location was good for shipping that wheat back east.

The poet C. L. Edson wrote this old poem about important cities in the world and included Kansas City. It must have been his opinion that agriculture was extremely important to Kansas City.

Longhorn cattle were brought from Texas to Kansas City

Livestock continued to be very important to Kansas City for many years. In fact, one of our nation's largest livestock shows is held each year in Kansas City. It is called the American Royal. In 1999, the American Royal celebrated its 100th Anniversary. This means that for 100 years, livestock from all over the United States have been brought to Kansas City each fall to be judged.



The 1999 Champion at Kansas City's American Royal



(courtesy of Barker Photography)

The American Royal also has an outstanding web site:
<http://www.americanroyal.com/educate.htm>

Most of the cattle that we raise today look very different from the Longhorn cattle that were brought from Texas during the cattle drives. Today's cattle are much larger and much more meaty. Beef from today's cattle is also more tender. Note the difference in appearance of the longhorn steer to the modern champion steer.

The city of Kansas City is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. Many activities are scheduled throughout the year. Agriculture and the beef industry are two of the most important aspects of Kansas City's history that will be remembered

You read a poem about the importance of beef and bread to Kansas City. Write your own poem about a farm animal and some of its uses.

For more information on Kansas City's celebration, visit this web site: <http://www.kc150.org>

Here's a good one:

What is the #1 use of cowhide leather in the U.S.?

Answer: To hold cows together!